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SUBJECT: PARTY SCHOOL CONTACTS ON COMING LEADERSHIP CHANGES

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Classified By: Political Internal Unit Chief Susan Thornton.
Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

1. (C) Two Central Party School (CPS) scholars predicted that there will be only a few changes in the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) at this fall's 17th Party Congress, but that the Politburo is in for substantial changes and maybe even an expansion. In discussing the impetus for and limits on change, our contacts emphasized the current diffusion of power among China's top leaders and the leadership's emphasis on stability above all else. The scholars referred to retirements for the ailing Huang Ju and elderly Luo Gan as "obvious," but said it is hard to say at this point who else, if anyone, will leave. Vice President Zeng Qinghong probably will remain and is cooperating "very well" with Hu Jintao. A number of China's "fifth generation" leaders, including Li Keqiang, Li Yuanchao, Xi Jinping and Bo Xilai, will be elevated to the Politburo, though none of them are likely to make it onto the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC). In one indication of the sensitivities surrounding ideological issues in advance of the Congress, a recent article by a CPS scholar criticizing inclusion of each leader's theoretical contributions into the Constitution resulted in CPS personnel being forced to attend ideological study sessions. Comment: Predictions of fewer changes at the top echo recent comments of other Embassy contacts and are in keeping with the current leadership's penchant for stability, but there is plenty of time for things to change before the Congress convenes in the fall. End Summary and Comment.

Downplaying Impending Changes at the Top

2. (C) Two Central Party School (CPS) scholars predicted that there will be only a few changes in the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) at this fall's 17th Party Congress during an April 20 lunch with Poloffs. According to Executive Deputy Director Kang Shaobang and Professor Li Yunlong (strictly protect both) of CPS's Institute of International Strategic Studies, power at the top of the Communist Party is more diffuse than in the past, with no one leader able to impose completely his will on others regarding personnel matters. Therefore, it is simply not possible for President Hu Jintao -- nor anyone else -- to entirely have his way with Politburo appointments, including regarding Hu's possible successor in 2012. Moreover, given this current leadership's quest for "stability above all else," Party bosses are keen to avoid a divisive struggle for power by moving cautiously and incrementally on personnel.

¶3. (C) As a result, although several leaders of China's younger "fifth generation" will be elevated to the Politburo, none of them are likely to make it onto the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC), Kang and Li asserted. Moreover, the relative inexperience of fifth generation leaders, none of whom are currently on the Politburo, is another reason why none of them are likely to "leapfrog" directly onto the PBSC this time around. For example, Hu protege and Liaoning Party Secretary Li Keqiang, is "no Hu Jintao" and is "not ready" for the PBSC, Kang stated, noting that Hu Jintao's sudden elevation to the PBSC in 1992 was "unprecedented." The "top four" young leaders likely to join the Politburo this year include Liaoning Party Secretary Li Keqiang, Jiangsu Party Secretary Li Yuanchao, Shanghai Party Secretary Xi Jinping and Minister of Commerce Bo Xilai. Other promising leaders of this generation likely to make the Politburo include Chongqing Party Secretary Wang Yang and newly appointed Tianjin Party Secretary Zhang Gaoli. Kang commented that "it is time" to

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bring the leader of China's fourth directly administered city onto the Politburo and assessed that the leader of Tianjin would remain on, as well.

Shrink PBSC, Expand Politburo?

¶4. (C) Among current members of the PBSC, the only changes that are "easy" to predict are that the ailing Huang Ju and elderly Luo Gan will be retired, Kang stated. Beyond that, it is hard to say who else, if anyone, will leave the top leadership body. None of the other members will be over 70, which is the upper age limit for Politburo Members according to informal Party norms. Asked about Vice President Zeng Qinghong (who also nominally heads CPS),

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Kang thought he would remain on the PBSC, noting that Zeng and Hu are cooperating "very well" together. Although Kang had heard the rumors reported in the Western press about Zeng's alleged push for the position of State President (Ref A), he dismissed the possibility, noting that the position would be a de facto demotion and would not accord with the realities of China's opening up to the outside world. Kang also cautioned against viewing Zeng purely as a "Shanghai Gang" member, noting that it was Zeng who persuaded Jiang Zemin to step down as Central Military Commission Chair in 2004.

¶5. (C) Commenting on members of the wider Politburo who are approaching the 70 year age threshold, Kang initially said that Vice Premier Wu Yi would retire. Upon reflection, however, he conceded that she is highly capable, has unique expertise and might stay. Beijing Party Secretary Liu Qi and Xinjiang Party Secretary Wang Lequan are likely to retire, Kang thought, though nothing is certain he warned, noting that Liu Qi's responsibility for the 2008 Olympic Games is a complicating factor in retiring him now. (Note: Liu Qi will turn 65 this year, Wang Lequan 63. End note.) Even if he were forced to retire, Kang thought Liu Qi could be appointed to a "special" position from which to continue his supervision of the Olympic Games.

¶6. (C) In a scenario of limited change at the very top, Kang asserted that one likely scenario is a reduction in PBSC numbers to seven accompanied by an expansion of the larger Politburo to make room for new blood. Hu Jintao has long been rumored to want to shrink the size of the PBSC, which was expanded to an unwieldy nine members in 2002 so as to accommodate Jiang Zemin's desire to place his people on the top body. Shrinking the PBSC, while simultaneously expanding the Politburo, would emulate current political reforms ongoing at the local level, Kang stated. These changes involve reducing the number of senior local leaders to three (one Party Secretary and two Deputies), but

expanding the number of officials on local Party committees. The idea behind these reforms, Kang explained, is to expand the numbers of those involved in policymaking, one form of "inner Party democracy." A similar move within the Politburo could achieve the same ends while also avoiding divisive competition for seats at the top, Kang thought.

17. (C) Kang said, however, that none of the arrangements for top personnel slots have been finalized, noting that it is still early and the situation could change before the fall. Nevertheless, current indications are that personnel changes at the top may not be as dramatic as initially anticipated, he reiterated.

Sensitivities Over Ideology

18. (C) Turning to ideology, Kang described the leadership's sensitivity to the subject in advance of the Congress. A Party School scholar recently was quoted in a CPS journal as arguing against revising the Party Constitution every few years to incorporate each leader's contribution to Party ideology. The article gained attention when it was picked up by the Singapore press and soon caught the attention of the "very top" of the Party. The school's "punishment" for this "mistake" was being forced to attend day-long ideological study sessions dedicated to examining the Party's "innovative theories." Kang had to head one of the study sessions, given his leadership position at the school, though he confessed, he "had no idea what it all meant." Professor Li offered that the purpose of the study sessions was to emphasize that each generation of Communist leadership has made great contributions to the development of socialist thought, from Marx, Engels and Lenin to Mao, Deng and Jiang. The implication, of course, is that Hu Jintao has also contributed significantly to the Party's thought, particularly his concepts such as Harmonious Society (the Party's goal) and Scientific Development (the means of achieving that objective). The upshot for this fall, Kang concluded, is that Hu Jintao's thought will be further elevated, but it is still too early to be written into the Constitution, which will be a matter for discussion in 2012.

Comment

19. (C) Professors Kang and Li's attempts to downplay the extent of personnel changes this fall at the very top of the Party echo comments made recently by other observers (Reftel). Such an outcome would reflect Hu's cautious nature and the leadership's emphasis on stability, not to mention the diffusion of power in the Party leadership

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described by Kang. Kang and Li have notably good access to China's top leaders and have been accurate predictors of previous changes, but even they pointed out that nothing is likely to have been finally decided yet and that there is plenty of time for things to change before the fall.

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